



NEWS RELEASE

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Energy companies unite to fight scams

Business owner targeted by scammer shares experience

EAU CLAIRE, Wis. – You get a call from someone telling you that your utility bill payment has not been received and unless you pay by 5 p.m., your power will be shut off. That’s the message salon owner Denise Mackey-Natz got last month. Rescheduled appointments, several phone calls and hours of stress and confusion followed before she realized that she might be the victim of a scam.

Mackey-Natz, owner of Urban Style in downtown Eau Claire, spoke out today to help launch “Slam the Scam,” an awareness campaign aimed at warning energy customers and preventing scams. In an effort to shut down scammers, Xcel Energy, along with Eau Claire Energy Cooperative, is encouraging customers who think they are being targeted by a scammer to simply end the conversation – “slam” down the phone.

Energy companies across the country are reporting an increase in scams aimed at customers. In Wisconsin, some energy companies are experiencing an increase of more than 400 percent in reported scam attempts in the past year. Scammers are targeting all customers, but particularly small businesses. In most cases, a scammer calls during busy hours of operation and threatens to disconnect the customer’s electricity or natural gas service unless the customer makes an immediate payment.

Scammers are using various tactics to con customers into providing payment. Posing as energy company employees, scammers have been known to:

- Tell intended victims their accounts are past due and threaten to disconnect their electricity or natural gas service if they do not make payments immediately.
- Require victims to pay using a pre-paid debit card, such as a Green Dot card.
- Manipulate caller ID to display a fake number, which may actually be the energy company’s number. This is called “spoofing.”

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- Email customers phony bills that appear to be from an energy provider with an account number, amount due, due date and a link to make the payment.

Protecting personal and financial customer data is a top priority for energy companies, and they are working together to provide solutions to protect the public from scams. Energy companies also want customers to know how to identify a scam. If they are behind on their bills, they will receive a written notice before service disconnection. Customers who have not received a disconnection notice in the mail should not engage anyone on the phone or by email demanding to take payment. Instead, customers should hang up and contact their respective energy company to verify account status and report the attempted scam. They are also encouraged to report the incident to local law enforcement. Energy companies offer the following tips to avoid being victimized:

- Never give out personal information or credit card numbers or wire money as a result of an unexpected or unsolicited call or email if you cannot validate the authenticity.
- Be suspicious if the caller is insisting on the use of a pre-paid debit card or an immediate payment. Energy companies provide many options for payment.
- Know that energy companies will contact customers first by U.S. mail about past due bills. A disconnection notice is sent in writing before your service is turned off
- If it just doesn't feel right, "slam the scam" and end the conversation.
- Energy companies welcome calls to verify account status. Contact your provider using a number provided on a recent bill or the company's website.

Xcel Energy (NYSE: XEL) is a major U.S. electricity and natural gas company with regulated operations in eight Western and Midwestern states. Xcel Energy provides a comprehensive portfolio of energy-related products and services to 3.5 million electricity customers and 1.9 million natural gas customers through its four operating companies. Operations in Wisconsin and Michigan are headquartered in Eau Claire, Wis.

Eau Claire Energy Cooperative is a member-owned and member-controlled electric cooperative celebrating 77 years of providing reliable and affordable electricity and related services to more than 10,700 member-owners in Eau Claire County and portions of Chippewa, Dunn, Pepin, Buffalo, Trempealeau and Jackson Counties. Eau Claire Energy Cooperative is a Touchstone Energy® cooperative and a member-owner in the Dairyland Power Cooperative system of electric cooperatives that generates and transmits reliable electric power in 62 counties of four states (Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois).